

FROM: NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE
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THE NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

Background Material

One sunny, May morning in 1949, two technicians from General Electric's headquarters in Schenectady, N. Y., strolled on the campus of Howard University's engineering college in Washington, D. C. Before the day was over they exploded a new kind of chain-reaction "bomb" that has continued to produce its own brand of sub-revolutions in every part of the country ever since. Scientific prediction is that it will perpetuate itself indefinitely. *redundant*

Though the "bomb" already has drastically altered the lives of hundreds of thousands of persons it consisted merely of interviewing fourteen engineering students, offering jobs to seven and hiring five.

The importance of the event - the first official visit of a major U. S. industry to a Negro college to recruit personnel - is that it paved the way for two brand new attitudes. Industry "discovered" a new source of highly trained man-power. Apprehensive Negro students, who previously had little hope that their ability and training would be given a real chance, were inspired to prepare and to plan for their future. In five years the new attitudes have paid dividends of millions of dollars to our economy.

To the officials of the National Urban League who had set the stage and arranged the visit it was a good day. To Julius Thomas, director of the industrial relations department of the Urban League, it was one of the most successful coups in a series of remarkable victories.

Events such as these provide the encouragement that enables the Urban League staff of professionals and its volunteer members, white and Negro, to

persist in their unheralded but enormously gratifying and vital work. Yet, if you were to ask a group of well-informed persons what the Urban League is, the chances are that few could tell you.

One of the two oldest and most effective organizations working in the field of race relations (the other is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) the Urban League operates quietly sometimes deliberately avoiding publicity in order to achieve its objectives. These are to establish democratic patterns of equal opportunity to non-whites, particularly in employment, training and housing.

Operating through sixty branches, all of which are Red-Feather agencies, in thirty states, the Urban League avoids extremes and agitation. Its 43-year-old history is crammed with inspiring and frequently exciting examples of steadily improving race relations. Recently in a few cities it has begun to include into its program, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Chinese and Japanese-Americans.

In identifying the separate and altogether different roles played by the Urban League and the NAACP, many persons dub the NAACP the "War Department" while the Urban League is referred to as the "State Department". The NAACP operates in the arena of legal and legislative activity concerned with Negro civil rights, hence its efforts are generally well publicized.

By the very nature of its work the Urban League lends itself to anonymity. Its name, a hangover from its earlier days when for years it was known as the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, is a misnomer that frequently confuses the public. Nevertheless, it is extremely well known to experts in the specialized fields in which it operates: housing, employment, health and vocational guidance. Its accomplishments would have been regarded as impossible of achievement a scarce ten years ago and its executive director, thoughtful, pipe-smoking Lester B. Granger, is one of democracy's unsung heroes.

The importance to the League of the General Electric's visit to Howard University was that it represented a "First". The Urban League lives on "First's". Once an established pattern of segregation has been cracked the way is opened for the League to create an "integrated" pattern whereby Negroes and whites, hitherto divided, can work and live together under conditions of equal opportunity. This is the Urban League's goal.

Most encouraging to the average American is the fact that its results have been achieved by voluntary teamwork on the part of white and Negro leaders. Working together they are proving to a watching and skeptical world that America can be and is the land of equal opportunity.

The progress is marked, for the most part, in little steps. But the aggregate of these steps is a gigantic stride. A good example is Gary, Indiana - a young city less than fifty years old. One in three of its 150,000 persons is a Negro. Nine years ago when the Gary Urban League was organized, as a result of a study requested by civic leaders, Gary was regarded as among the acute tension areas in the country with sporadic clashes taking place between racial groups.

The first job tackled by the new League was handling the nationally publicized strike of white high school students against attendance of Negroes at "their" school. Practically single-handed the new Urban League executive settled the strike by bringing together first groups of students, then groups of parents, and then community leaders. The strike ended with a pledge of interracial cooperation enunciated by the white and colored students, and approved by the Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Education and the editorial columns of the local press. Though there were still problems to be solved, Gary came to be regarded as a normal city.

That was until July 1, 1953. On that day a group of Negro women and a two-year-old child visiting the town's beach on Lake Michigan, were set upon by

a mob of teen-age boys - and girls - who abused them, roughed them up and damaged their automobile. Once again the threat of violence and mob action impended in Gary.

The Urban League stepped in and before the month was over the group of trouble makers had been stopped. Subversive interests were denied an opportunity to exploit another issue in their un-American trouble-making program.

The way the Urban League worked in Gary is typical of almost all Urban League action. To many it would appear to be most ineffectual. It made a study. In most organizations "making a study" is the surest way to kill a project. But, as Lester Granger puts it, "The Urban League's studies are a device for social action." The first step in this study was a repeat visit to the beach by the League's executive secretary, Clifford Minton, accompanied by a committee of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Just as in the first visit, most bathers were pleasant and friendly. But in a few moments, the Urban League party was surrounded by a threatening group of boys and girls. Even the presence of the police, who were there according to a pre-arranged plan, didn't deter the gang.

With these two incidents to draw upon, the League made a thorough, objective study. Once the facts were determined and interpreted the League was able to recruit community leaders and guided a program in which Negro and white leadership working together with the Mayor, Chief of Police and the press were able to spike, once and for all, the mob action.

Local publicity was extremely helpful. Police protection which had been less than lax - their attitude during the first incident was one of indifference - improved remarkably after editorials appeared in the local press. The Mayor became "encouraged" to commit his administration to give proper protection to convert the ringleaders was started by local ministers and, finally, work began on increasing the beach frontage and enlarging parking and beach-house facilities.

The situation for this summer appears to hold no threats. But few persons outside of those immediately concerned, realize how close Gary came once again to having been the scene of violent race riots.

It's Lester Granger's opinion that the problem of racial tensions in American urban areas largely will be solved when the Harlems and other "ghettos" are broken up and whites and non-whites are able to live next door to each other peacefully. Granger's argument is that the best and quickest way to improve race relations is to open up avenues of communication between whites and Negroes. Public housing experience has proven, he says, that almost everywhere Negroes and whites live side by side, they are good neighbors, frequently developing close friendships. In the all too few instances where private housing has given Negroes and whites a chance to be neighbors similar success has been the result.

Though he knows, that even in Northern cities, integrated housing will not be accomplished on a broad scale for many, many years, he and the Urban League have taken a position squarely behind the principle of mixed housing as opposed to the artificial barriers imposed by all-Negro developments and areas. Granger points to developments in cities across the country, where Negroes and whites live next to each other with the same degree of harmony that exists between residents of all white or all-Negro developments.

Among the Urban League's behind-the-scenes roles, is the work of its Committee on Housing Activities with its director, Reginald Johnson, who imperceptibly, has inched groups of builders and mortgage financiers to the point where they are now willing to work with the minority market. Here again the League's formula of "start with a study" has proven to be successful. Johnson's most recent study, an analysis of mortgage financing for Negro properties, is currently a 25-cent best-seller in real estate and financial circles, and orders are coming in from all sections of the country. As a result,

experts predict, we will see a more enlightened attitude and eventually a trickle and then a regular flow of sorely needed private financing.

Some of the Urban League's most exciting achievements have taken place, not in the North, but in the South and in regions where race relations a few years ago were extremely bad. One such success, in Florida's Brewster and Duval Counties, is a shining example of American democracy at work and is a good illustration of how local Leagues operate.

In 1951 plans were announced for the erection in Duval County of a new nurse training School. Of the fifteen such schools in Florida only one accepted Negro girls and that was on a collegiate level. Since the monies had been raised from public taxes, a committee of the Jacksonville Urban League's board of directors met with the welfare board and urged that facilities for the training of Negro girls be included. Two years they urged but no action was taken. Finally, a Citizens' Community Council, composed of women interested in the Community Chest campaign, was organized. They became concerned and discovered that in the Jacksonville area alone there were three nurse training schools for white girls and a fourth in the planning stage. It was also discovered that although the then head of the Duval County Welfare Board would never cooperate with plans for a Negro nurse training school, in three months his term would expire. It was suggested that the League work for his replacement by a person sympathetic to the proposal. When the time came for a new appointee, the Governor of Florida named the Chairman of the Jacksonville Urban League, Crawford Solomon, a white businessman. On March 15, 1954, the Brewster Duval County Nurse Training School for Negro girls opened, using the facilities of a school formerly in operation at the all-Negro Brewster Hospital. But the new school will also be allowed to use the facilities of the Duval County Medical Center.

Thus, quietly, peacefully and without public demonstrations or agitation, using the methods and tools open to all Americans, the Urban League - and incidentally, American democracy - won another small but vital victory in its incessant fight for equal opportunity.

Victories such as these are taking place in all parts of our country. Last year, in Atlanta two League members and a third Negro were elected to city government posts. In Baltimore the first ten Negroes began training for firemen; the Food Fair Stores hired its first Negro cashiers. In Buffalo a Negro was able to penetrate one of the few remaining labor unions that barred Negroes. In Chicago NBC hired its first Negro stenographers, Argonne Laboratory its first Negro chemist. In Detroit the Free Press hired its first Negro reporter, the J. L. Hudson store its first Negro salespeople. In Miami, Negroes joined the staffs of the largest hospitals. In New Orleans the Mayor appointed four Urban Leaguers to a Housing Study Committee, the first time Negroes received official recognition on the city board. In Portland, after eight years of conferences, the bus company hired its first Negro operators. In Seattle the Federal Reserve Bank hired its first Negro clerk. "Firsts" and pilot placements such as these measure the League's progress.

The National Urban League is occasionally accused of moving too slowly. This charge may be heard in its own conferences. But there are also a few who feel that it is too aggressive. Its aim, however, is to maintain a calm, effective, professional, middle-of-the-road approach to the problem of creating better race relations.

The nearest it has come to being a militant "action" group occurred in the spring of 1954. In the League's opinion, United States Steel Corporation was creating a bad race relations pattern in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where the corporation was building its huge new Fairless plant. The League felt that the company was not taking seriously enough its moral obligations to hire without

regard to race, creed or color, particularly technical and professional personnel.

In addition, the League considered that the company's position on the housing of its employees - accepting no responsibility for builders who ostracized Negroes in the Fairless Hills housing development - was morally wrong.

The League's board of directors and its staff members were particularly concerned lest U. S. Steel help to create a pattern in Bucks County that would set back by several years the previously healthy race relations condition in that area. After two years of negotiations and conferences with the company, the League's Board prepared to tell its story to the public and let the pressure of public opinion bear on the firm.

At the last moment there were signs of a changing company policy. Personal conversations between the League's president, Robert Dowling and E. E. Moore, Vice-President of U. S. Steel, indicated that the company would cooperate in good faith. The League considered this encouraging enough to suspend plans for a press conference. The League knows that it has a long way to go before an acceptable integrated pattern has been established in Bucks County. Whilst employment gains have been made, the basic problem of housing segregation introduced into a formerly democratic, semi-rural area is still a worsening threat to the future. The League's housing, industrial relations and community services committees are hard at work to help U. S. Steel improve the picture.

The probability is that together they will succeed.

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